

*Statement of Significance for the Fort Ray Historic District
(Charcoal and Alice Islands) and the Mermaid Cove Mausoleum*

Sitka, Alaska

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Sitka Safety Area Improvement, Phase 1

Project 72038

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Overview

Fort Ray was the Army garrison for the defense of the Sitka Naval Air Station (later the Sitka Naval Operating Base), the earliest authorized naval facility of the World War II era in the Territory of Alaska. The fort, recorded in the Alaska Heritage Resources Survey as SIT-563, was located on Charcoal and Alice Islands, approximately one half mile southwest of Sitka (Figure 1). Fort Ray, established after the air station, was crowded onto these two islets off the southern coast of Japonski Island (Envirosphere 1987:4-117). Only 0.4 mile wide, Charcoal Island was named by the Russian navigator Ivan Vasiliev in 1809 (Orth 1967:200). Alice Island, which is even smaller, was named in 1880 by the U.S. Navy (Orth 1967:65).

The Fort Ray Historic District is adjacent to the Sitka Naval Operating Base & U.S. Army Coastal Defenses National Historic Landmark (SIT-079) (Figure 2). The National Historic Landmark (NHL), listed on the National Register of Historic Places on August 11, 1986, includes the Naval Base on Japonski Island and coastal defenses (Fort Rousseau) on Makhnati Island and its causeway islands. The U.S. Coast Guard Station and Sitka airport on Japonski were specifically excluded from the NHL. The NHL nomination also declares, without explanation, that "[Charcoal and Alice Islands] are not considered to be historically significant" (Thompson 1984). The foregoing notwithstanding, Fort Ray is eligible for the National Register as a historic district associated with the NHL. The fort is significant under Criterion A for its role as a United States defensive unit during War World II. An ammunition magazine on Charcoal Island is also significant under Criterion A for the part it played in the campaign

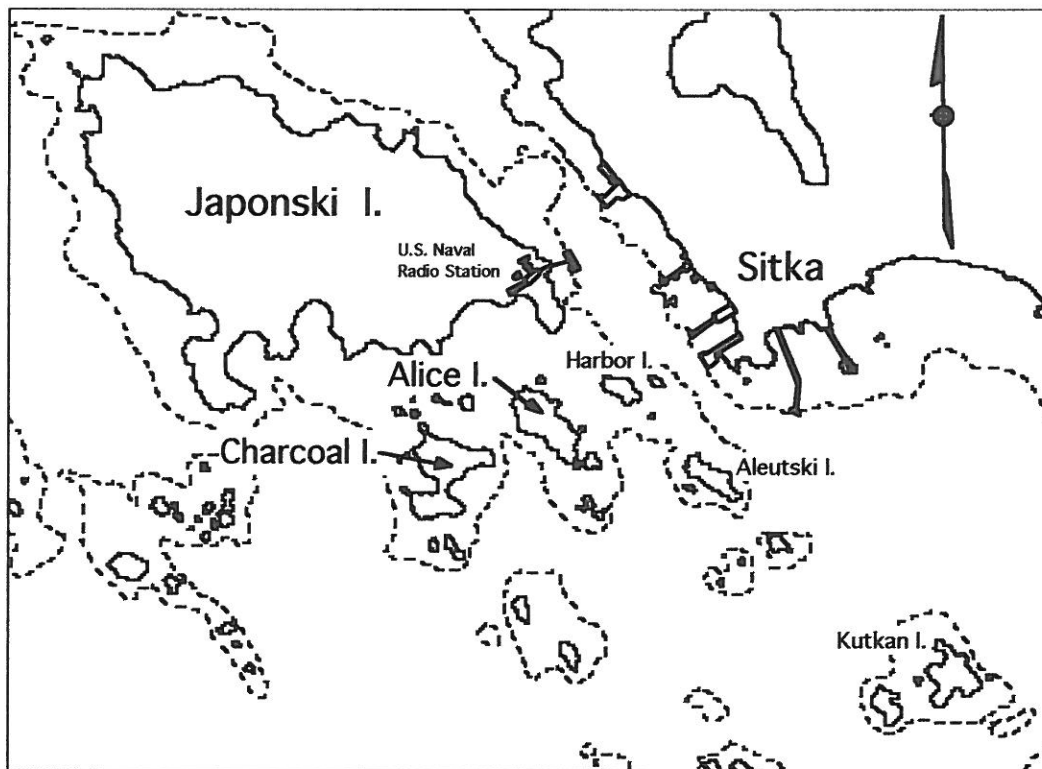


Figure 1. Sitka Harbor Alaska. Redrawn from a 1927 U.S. Army Corps of Engineers map.

against tuberculosis in Alaska in the 1940s and 1950s.

Significance

Japonski Island was set aside as a naval reservation in the nineteenth century. The Navy had a coaling station on the island in early 1900s and in 1937 established the first seaplane base in the Territory of Alaska. Authorization for the construction of additional naval facilities at Sitka, along with an appropriation of fifteen million dollars, came in the late 1930s. Construction began in 1940, with additional projects incorporated into the plans in May 1941 (Envirosphere 1987:5-112). The seaplane base formally became a Naval Air Station in 1939, and in 1942 the air station was upgraded to a Naval Operating Base (Hunter 1999).

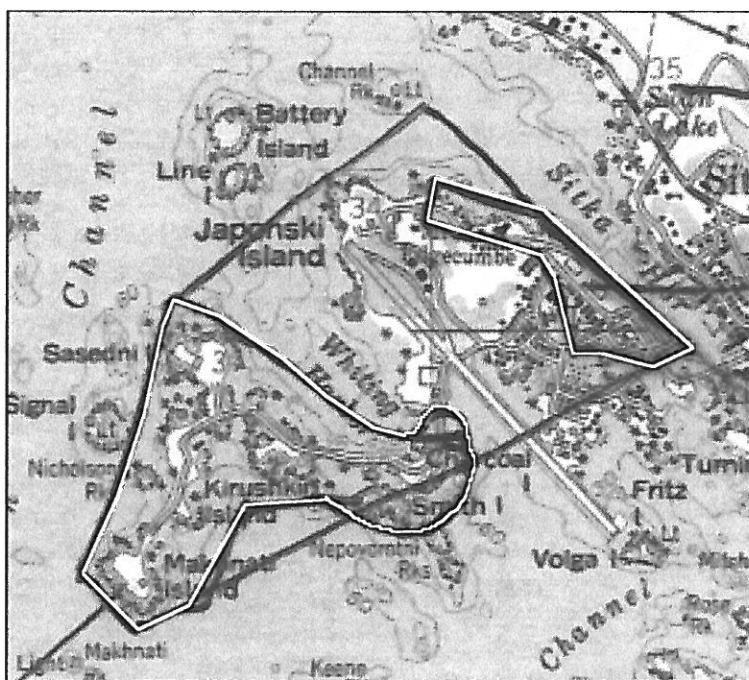


Figure 2. Boundaries (outlined in white) of the Sitka Naval Operating Base and US Army Coastal Defenses NHL. From Thompson 1984.

Once construction of the Naval Air Station was underway, planning began for the Army protective garrison facilities. As noted by Colt Denfeld (1985:11):

The defense of Navy bases in Alaska was the responsibility of the Army but since it involved two services planning was accomplished by a Joint Planning Committee...Army and Navy officers sat down to create the local defense plans. They agreed that duplication of facilities should be avoided, that both the Army and Navy could share the same facilities. Additionally they agreed that Army construction would be accomplished through Navy contracts.

Construction of the Fort Ray garrison began in January of 1941. The early work at Fort Ray was done by Navy contractor Siems Drake Puget Sound:

In mid-September 1940, Bob Dyer again hired me to work for Siems-Drake. He told me that more than \$10 million had been appropriated for the leveling of islands and building of causeways from one to another of the chain of small islands running seaward from Japonski Island...The biggest project was the leveling of Charcoal Island, which was 300 feet high and almost solid rock. It was to become an army base (Brookman 1984:120).

It took more than a year to level Charcoal at eight feet above high tide mark so the carpenters could start building army barracks. It was eventually named Fort Ray (Brookman 1984:124).

Siems Drake's workers were replaced by Seabee battalions in 1943 (Envirosphere 1987:5-113):

War also brought the decision of the Bureau of Yards and Docks to replace civilian workman in the war zones with Seabees as soon as they could be supplied. Pursuant to the navy's instructions, the contractors arranged for the evacuation of all civilian workman as winter gave way to the fourth spring season to arrive in Alaska since the advent of the builders (Siems Drake n.d.:11).

Because the Army facilities were added to the already existing Navy base, they had to be squeezed into whatever space was still available:

Japonski's space was gone. The army structures, of necessity, were dispersed to seven adjacent islands. And this brought about the most unique feature of all the construction at Sitka, the building of a causeway to link these islands with the base (Siems Drake n.d.:9).

The Army focused on Charcoal and Alice Islands, which adjoined the main Navy facilities to the south. These two small islands, named Fort Ray in honor of Brigadier General Patrick Ray, became the site of Army administration, housing, and hospital facilities (Figure 3). Charcoal and Alice Islands are just two of a series of small outcrops scattered to the south and west of Japonski Island that were ultimately connected by an 8,000-foot-long, rock core and faced causeway. Cantonments on Kirushkin, Sasedni, Vibrulennoi, Makhnati, Gold, and Baranof Islands, together with additional facilities at Charcoal and Alice Islands, were started under a later construction program (Envirosphere 1987:5-113). Although "Fort Ray" is often used to describe all of the military installations in Sitka, the name originally applied only to the Army garrison on Charcoal and Alice Islands.

By February of 1944, Army facilities on Charcoal Island included the commander's quarters, barracks, mess halls, administration buildings, officers' quarters, an officers' club, motor sheds, quartermaster warehouses, day rooms, an ordnance shop, cold storage buildings, a fire station, a post exchange, a guardhouse, a paint and oil storage building, an ammunition magazine, and a softball field complete with bleachers (Figure 4). Along the causeway between Charcoal and Japonski Islands was the post library. Another causeway linked Charcoal to Alice Island, where there was a three-ward hospital, an infirmary, officers' and nurses' quarters, mess halls, storehouses, a boiler house, barracks, a bakery, a laundry, utility buildings, garages, a decontamination station, cold storage, a recreation building, a post office, and an emergency powerhouse. Also on Alice Island were a ferry slip, a pier with seven finger floats, a dock house, and a boat shop. The cantonment on these two islands was built using standard, pre-war, Constructing Quartermaster plans which included building types and layouts which were ill-designed for defense (Envirosphere 1987:5-112-113).

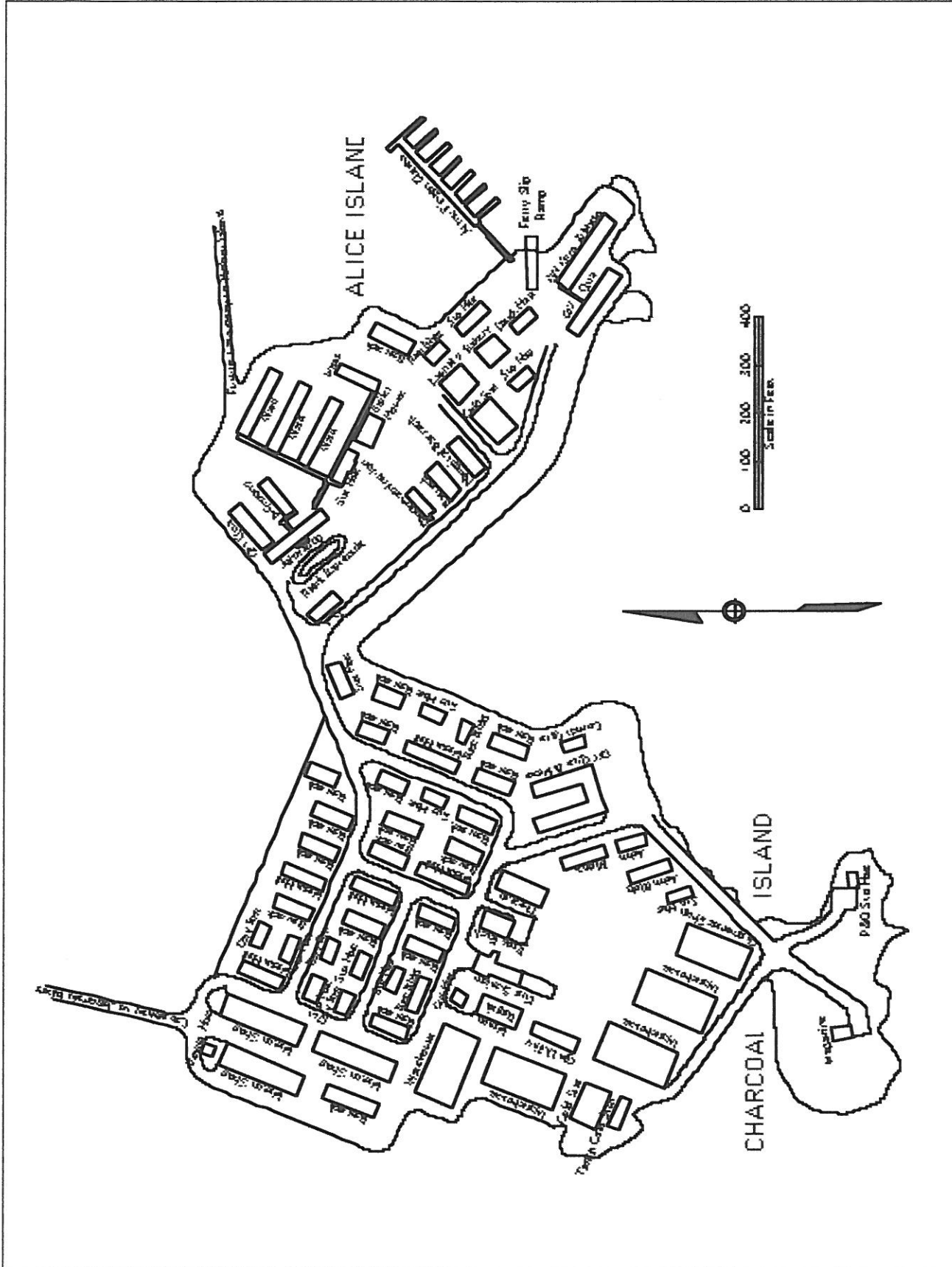


Figure 3. Fort Ray Army Garrison in October 1943. Redrawn from Bush 1984:58. All of the planned construction had been completed except for the paint and oil store house at the southern end of Charcoal Island, the power house at the base of the Japonski causeway, and the causeway to Harbor Island. The latter two were never built.



Figure 4. Fort Ray Garrison. This is an enlarged section of a Federal Aviation Administration photograph entitled "Aerial View of Navy Seaplane Base." Although undated, this picture was taken sometime after 1944. (Anchorage Museum of History and Art B.86.28.14236)

A detailed description of Fort Ray is included in a 1947 history of World War II naval bases:

Fort Ray, the Army garrison at Sitka, was constructed to accommodate 2,988 men and 194 officers. Buildings for housing totaled 136; about half of them were semi-permanent, and the remainder, temporary. Eighteen messhalls and 12 recreation buildings were constructed. Storage facilities included 31,440 cubic feet of freezer space, 38,110 cubic feet of chill space, and 66,540 square feet of general storage. Administration offices were housed in 11 buildings with a total floor-area of 10,715 square feet. Utilities were provided by the Navy, with the exception of a small-capacity emergency power equipment. Hospital space, including infirmaries, totaled 127 beds in seven units. Semi-permanent structures made up five of these, and quonset huts the other two. Station maintenance equipment, including a laundry, paint and oil storage, garage and repair shops, were located in 13 buildings, with a total floor-space of 66,705 square feet. Harbor defenses involved construction of gun emplacements and magazines (Anonymous 1947:165).

Fort Ray was the Army's headquarters at Sitka from 1941 until 1943. However, in 1943, a reorganization resulted in the fort being attached to Makhnati Island, which was named Fort Rousseau and declared the headquarters post for the Harbor Defenses of Sitka (Thompson 1984). The Navy deactivated Sitka in June 1944. By that time, the Army facilities were under caretaker status. The entire facility was transferred to the Alaska Native Service in August 1946.

Physical Description and Integrity

The Fort Ray Historical District encompasses all of Charcoal and Alice Islands. Although connected to Japonski Island, Charcoal and Alice Islands form a distinctive geographic unit. The boundary of the district includes all of the buildings and structures built during the period of significance, as well as the landscape that reflects the nature of the Fort Ray garrison.

In the mid 1980s, "the World War II remains at Sitka consist[ed] largely of isolated structures in various states of repair with the sense of the facility as an operating unit being heavily impaired, although specific constructions are of interest" (Envirosphere 1987:5-114-115). A 1985 inventory of Charcoal and Alice Islands by Sverdrup & Parcel and Associates noted "37 buildings in use to be retained" (Envirosphere 1987:5-114). In a 1987 article, Colt Denfeld noted that:

Portions of Fort Ray, the Army post on Charcoal and Alice Islands, are still standing. Two 63-man and two 45-man barracks, two day rooms, three orderly rooms, four mess halls, six storehouses and a Commanders quarters are awaiting interested explorers on Charcoal Island adjacent to Japonski Island. A few of these are in use as private residences and the rest are vacant. On Alice Island next to Charcoal a public school was built on the site of the post hospital leaving only a few quarters and warehouses (Denfeld 1987:29).

In 1986, Charcoal and Alice Islands were conveyed to Shee Atiká Incorporated, the Urban Native Corporation for Sitka. Most of the buildings that remained at the time of transfer were torn down in stages over the last eight or nine years. Some were also apparently moved into Sitka:

Dolores Farrell: And you know they still took those from Alice Island and Charcoal Island. They took those structures, I guess it was Alice Island, and brought them into town just, you know, a few years ago.

Walter Dangel: Some of them, yes. There's still one over here on Eagle Way--a piece of the old hospital...(Farrell 1997:9).

As of March 2000, there were nine contributing (Figures 5 and 6) and seven noncontributing buildings (Figures 7 and 8) on the two islands. Buildings remaining on Charcoal Island include an ammunition magazine (Figure 9), the ordnance shop (Figure 10), a quartermaster warehouse (Figure 11), a cold storage facility (Figure 12), a quartermaster utility building (Figure 13), the fire station (Figure 14), and a barracks (Figures 15, 16, and 17). A cold storage building (Figure 18) and a laundry (Figure 19) on Alice Island are in the process of being demolished (Figure 20) and will be gone by April 15, 2000. In addition to the contributing buildings, there are five pillboxes, rock-walled defensive positions, two causeways, three sections of sidewalk, and several sewer manholes which date to the period of significance (Figures 21-25).

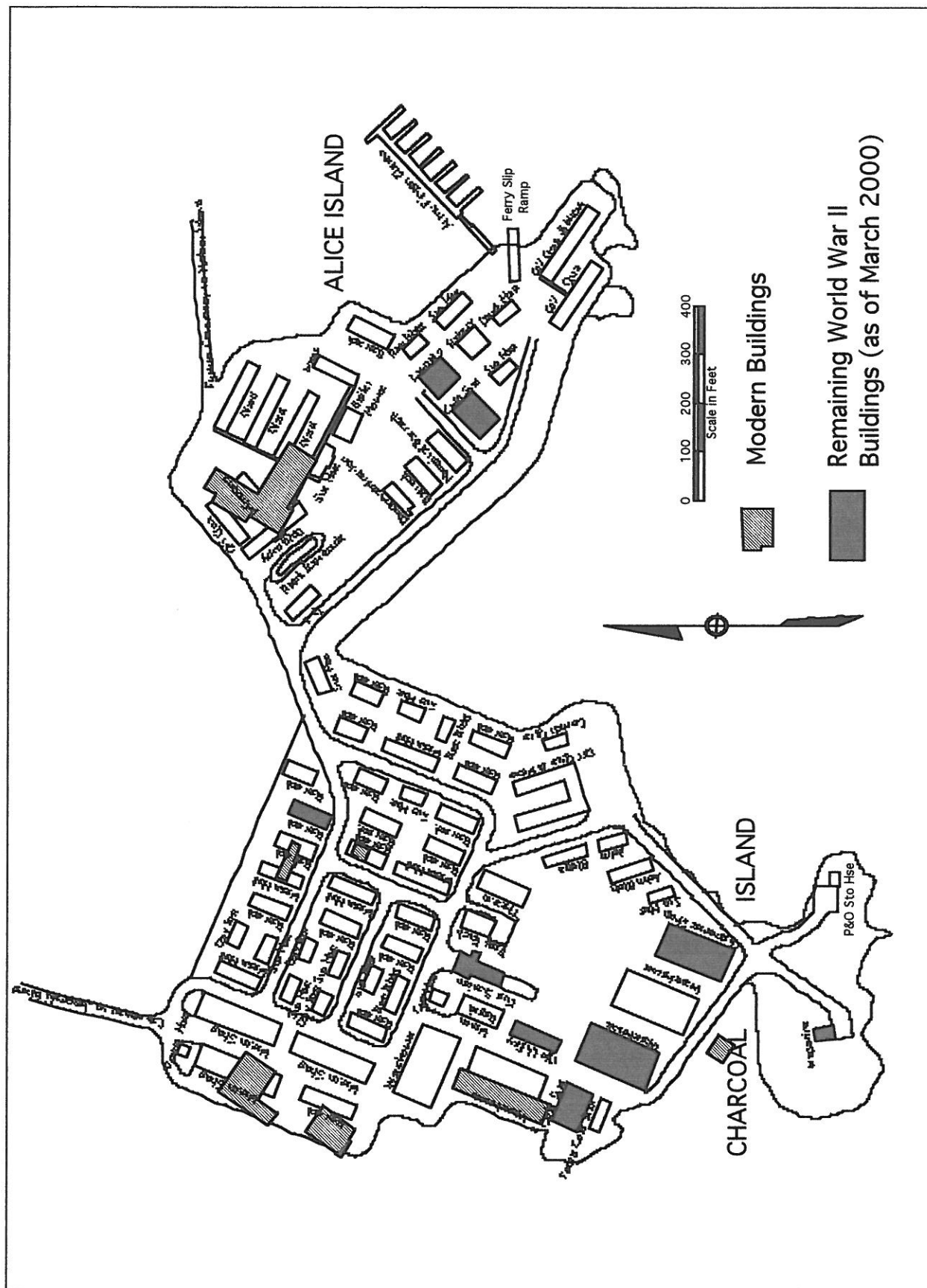
All of the buildings on Charcoal Island are still in use. Although they have been more or less altered for their modern functions, all still maintain their historic integrity. The ordnance shop is occupied by K & G Enterprises and a private residence. Its exterior is covered with sheet metal siding, and new sheet rock partitions and a second floor have been added to the interior. The quartermaster warehouse is used for offices and storage and is little changed. The cold storage building houses a fish processing business, the barracks is an apartment building, and the quartermaster utility building is now the Mt. Edgecumbe Day Care Center. The Sitka Tribe has a cultural center in the fire station. The ammunition magazine, now known as the Mermaid Cove mausoleum, houses victims of the Alaskan tuberculosis epidemic of the 1940s and 1950s.

The causeway connecting Charcoal and Alice Islands remains much as it was during the war, although the causeway between Charcoal and Japonski Islands--now Kruzof Avenue--has been significantly enlarged. Most of the concrete foundations of the demolished buildings have either been removed or covered with fill. However, the foundations of the paint and oil storehouse on Charcoal and one of the barracks on Alice Island still remain. The former locations of several buildings at the southeastern end of Alice Island, including the officers quarters and mess, the bakery, the dock house, and one of the storehouses, are marked with rectangular patches of angular rock fill.

The seven noncontributing buildings include a former elementary school, the offices of AT&T Alascom, a telephone or electrical utility building, a waste water treatment plant, a building housing Sitka Propeller and Al's Automotive Repair, and two trailer vans connected by a wooden roof. Sealing Cove, the basin to the north of the islands, is now a small boat harbor.



Figure 6. Buildings remaining at the Fort Ray Army Garrison in March 2000.



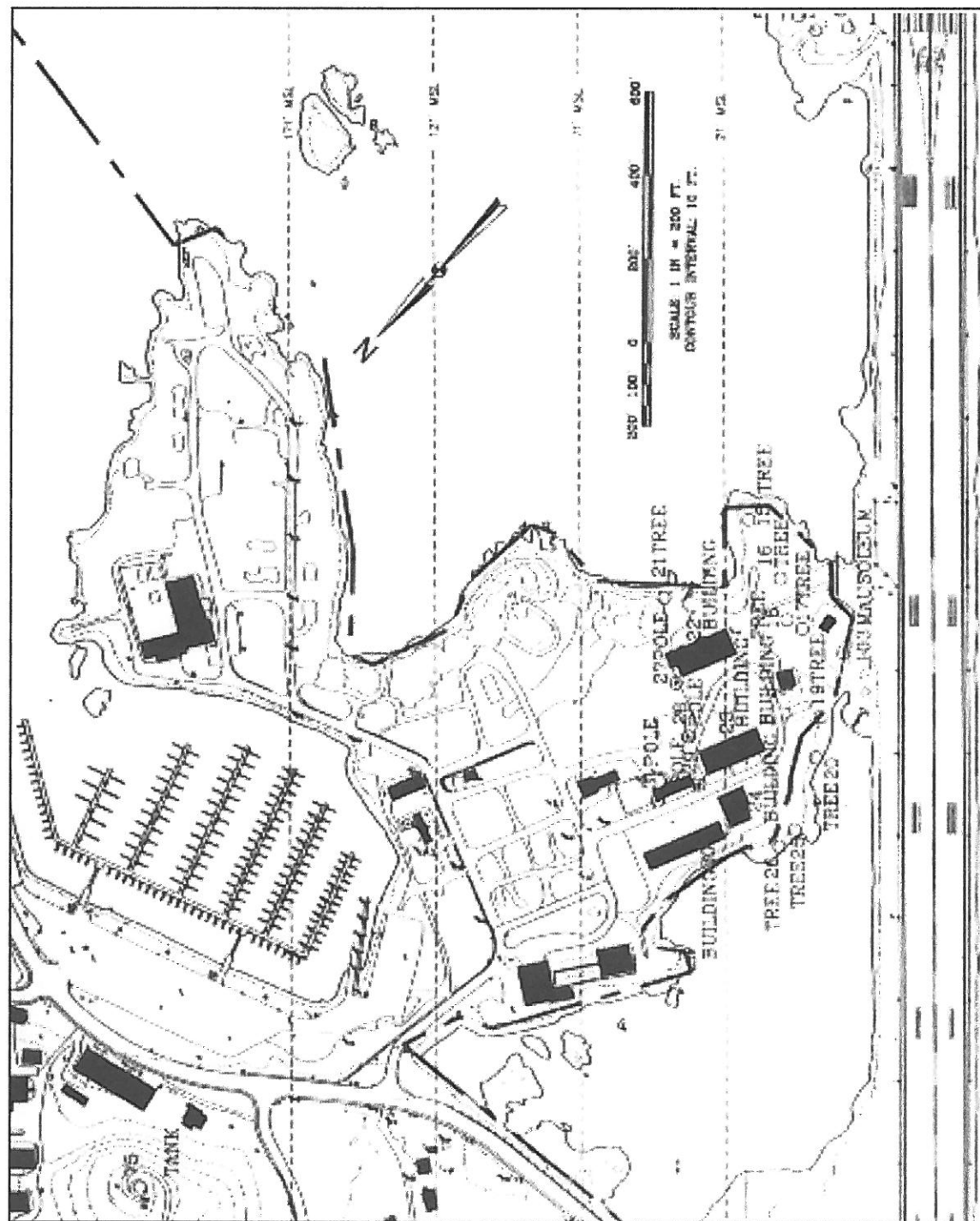


Figure 8. Locations of all buildings, both World War II and modern, on Charcoal and Alice Islands. The cold storage building and laundry on Alice Island, scheduled for demolition in April 2000, are not shown.



Figure 9. Ammunition magazine on Charcoal Island. View to the northwest.



Figure 10. Front elevation of the ordnance warehouse. View to the north.



Figure 11. Quatermaster warehouse. View to the southeast.



Figure 12. Cold storage building on Charcoal Island. View to the north.



Figure 13. Quartermaster utility building. View to the northeast.



Figure 14. Fire station. View to the southwest.



Figure 15. Barracks. View to the northeast.



Figure 16. Photograph of Army Garrison barracks at Fort Ray taken during World War II. (Sitka Historical Society)

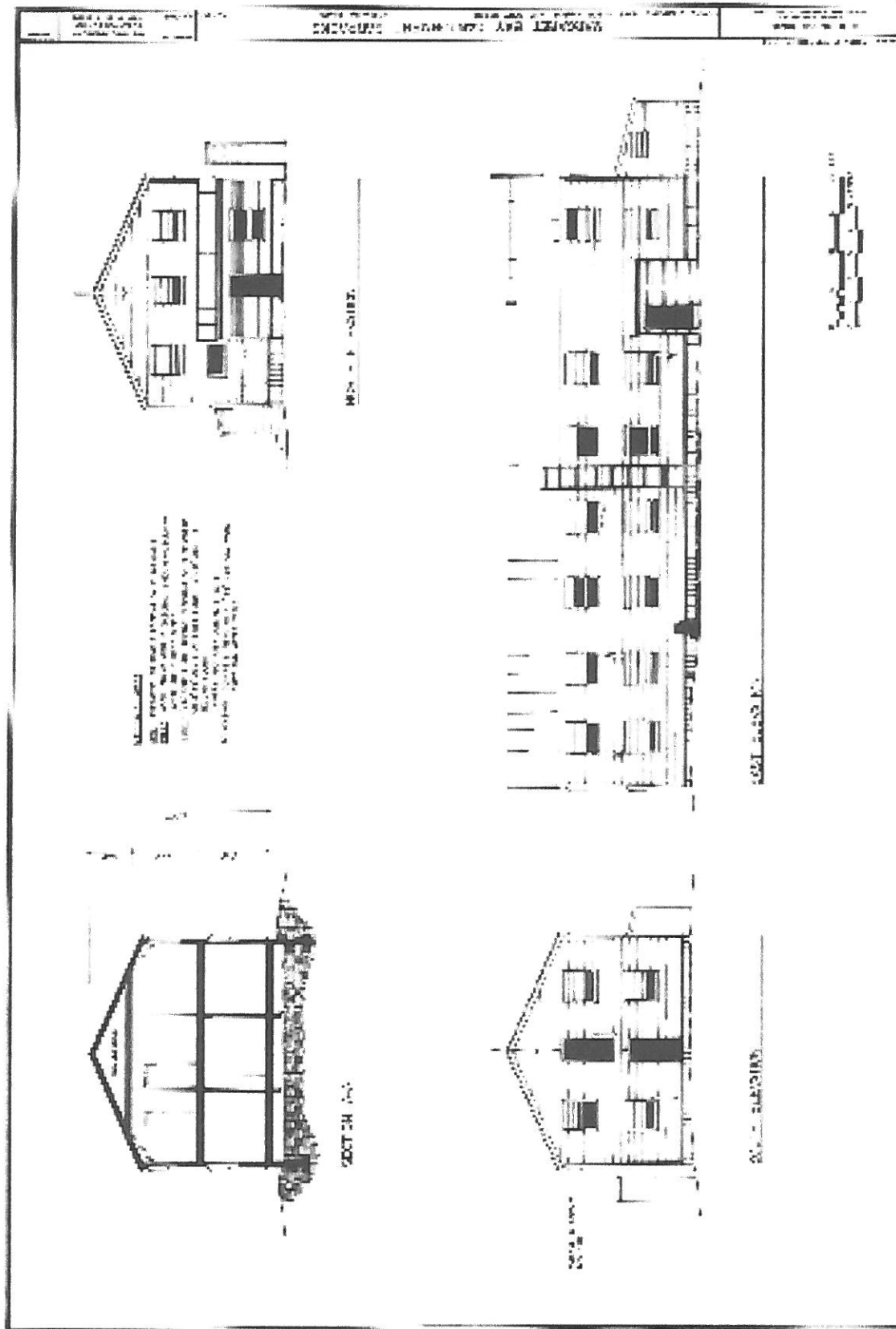


Figure 17. HABS drawing of a Margaret Bay cantonment barracks. The Charcoal Island and Margaret Bay barracks are similar in form and size, and were likely built from the same standard, Constructing Quartermaster plans. From Faulkner and Spude 1987.



Figure 18. Cold storage building on Alice Island. View to the north.



Figure 19. Laundry. View to the west.



Figure 20. Demolition of the cold storage facility on Alice Island. View to the northeast.



Figure 21. Reinforced concrete pillbox along the western shore of Charcoal Island, just south of the waste water treatment plant. View to the northeast.



Figure 22. Steel pillbox guarding the causeway between Charcoal and Japonski Islands. View to the northeast.



Figure 23. Remains of a reinforced concrete pillbox at the southeastern end of Alice Island. View to the east.



Figure 24. Manhole on Alice Island.



Figure 25. Sidewalk on the causeway between Charcoal and Alice Islands.

Areas of Significance (Context and Themes)

As noted previously, the Fort Ray Historical District is nationally significant under Criterion A for its role as a United States defensive unit during War World II. The historic context of the fort is “Alaska in World War II” and its period of significance is 1941 to 1944. The ammunition magazine on Charcoal Island is also significant under Criterion A for the part it played between 1946 and 1960 in the massive federal and territorial assault on tuberculosis in Alaska.

Allied Military Operations. Fort Ray was constructed to protect the Sitka Naval Operating Base. The fort typifies the military architecture of the period and the protective role of the

Fort Ray 1941-1944

Fort Ray was activated at Sitka, Alaska on March 21, 1941 as an Army Garrison and fixed harbor defense of the historic Port of Sitka during World War II. The garrison was named for Captain Patrick Henry Ray, 8th Infantry, acting signal officer. Captain Ray carried out many important activities in Alaska from 1881 to 1890. He is best remembered for bringing aid to destitute stampedeers during the gold rush.

Fort Ray was an active post during World War II. Its mission accomplished, it was reduced to care taking status on November 1, 1944.

Compliments of the 172 Infantry Brigade,
United States Army

Commemorative Plaque in Sitka’s
Centennial Hall

Army at Navy bases (Envirosphere 1987:5-115).

During first months of World War II, Sitka “was one of the few installations prepared to protect the North Pacific” (Thompson 1984). After the bombing of Dutch Harbor and the Japanese occupation of Attu and Kiska Islands, “Sitka was alert for a potential assault on the Alaskan mainland” and “the Army’s coastal defenses at Sitka...stood ready through those tense months to defend the naval base against invasion” (Thompson 1984). The threat of a Japanese invasion remained quite real until after the Battle of Midway in June of 1942.

Engineering and Logistics. Although Fort Ray was built according to standard quartermaster plans, its construction was anything but ordinary. Rather than let topography dictate the layout of the fort, Siems Drake Puget Sound leveled Charcoal and Alice Islands. These isolated and steep islands were converted into an orderly garrison by more than a

year of drilling and blasting (Brookman 1984:124), and by linking them to each other and the Naval Operating Base on Japonski. One has only to compare the 1927 map shown in Figure 1 and Bush’s 1943 drawing in Figure 3 to understand the scope of this undertaking.

Campaign Against Tuberculosis. (Note: The following information is borrowed freely from R. Fortune’s statement of significance for the Anchorage Medical Center of the Alaska Native Service, and the article “Final Repatriation for the Buried But Not Forgotten” by the staff of the Mukluk Telegraph.)

The ammunition magazine on Charcoal Island is one of several World War II-era structures at the Sitka Airport that served as burial sites for patients who died at the Mount Edgecumbe Indian Health Service Hospital in the 1940s and 1950s. With the close of World War II, federal and territorial officials for the first time were able to develop the resources needed to address the serious tuberculosis problem among Alaska Natives. A study published in 1938 by the

territorial epidemiologist had reported the estimated overall tuberculosis mortality among Alaska Natives to be 845 per 100,000, one of the highest rates ever recorded in the world. In the late 1940s, a survey of tuberculin sensitivity in the Yukon-Kuskokwim region showed that 89 percent of children aged five to eight were infected with tuberculosis. Although the Alaska Native Service (the regional office of the Bureau of Indian Affairs) was doing its best to cope with the problem, tight budgets and the stringencies of the wartime period only aggravated the problem. At the close of the war, there were an estimated 3,500 cases of active tuberculosis among the Native population of Alaska, with only 78 beds available for tuberculosis care in the territory. Virtually every Native family was affected by the disease, which often claimed multiple members of the same family. Children were particularly susceptible to the different forms of tuberculosis.

In 1945, Governor Ernest Gruening appointed C. Earl Albrecht as the first full-time commissioner of health for the territory. Dr. Albrecht undertook a vigorous campaign against tuberculosis by focusing the efforts not only of the newly strengthened Alaska Department of Health, but also of the Alaska Native Service, the U.S. Public Health Service, nonprofit organizations such as the Alaska Tuberculosis Association, and the private sector of medicine.

One of the basic strategies of the tuberculosis program was to make use of surplus military equipment and installations. In 1946, the Alaska Native Service obtained title to the army installation at Alice Island and the navy base on Japonski Island. Alice Island replaced Skagway as the Native sanatorium and the hospital at Mt. Edgecumbe became an orthopedic facility for the care of bone and joint tuberculosis under the joint management of the Alaska Department of Health and the Alaska Native Service.

In 1947 the American Medical Association sent a team of consultants to survey health conditions throughout the territory. Their report, detailing the grim health conditions in the villages, was published nationally and had (as intended) a major impact on Congress. The report recommended a major new construction effort in Alaska of some 1,000 new beds to accommodate the many persons with active tuberculosis who were still untreated. In response, a new hospital, mainly for tuberculosis, was opened at Mt. Edgecumbe in 1950.

The intensive efforts of the Alaska Department of Health and others during the 1950s identified a growing number of patients with active disease and led to their prompt hospitalization at several institutions, including the one at Mt. Edgecumbe. At the peak of the program in 1957, some 1,400 Alaska Natives were hospitalized for tuberculosis. This intensive effort, combined with home drug treatment of many more in the villages, led to a precipitous decline in tuberculosis. By 1963, all Native tuberculosis inpatients were being treated at the Anchorage hospital, and by 1973 the last tuberculosis ward in the state was closed. In 1968, not a single death from tuberculosis occurred in Alaska.

Given the high mortality rate and a lack of transportation and funding, the medical staff at Mt. Edgecumbe hospital were unable to return deceased Alaska Natives to their villages. Instead, the facilities staff built wooden caskets and placed the deceased in various ammunition magazines, including the one on Charcoal Island which became known as the Mermaid Cove mausoleum.

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